



Office of the President

“The Language Pledge and Its Power,” Language Schools Commencement, August 2016

August 1, 2016

Graduates, Faculty, and Friends—

I am delighted to be here at the Language Schools' Commencement. First, I would like to put Gamaliel Painter's cane into circulation among you.

Please pass it among yourselves, and when the last person receives the cane, will he or she please return it to me.

Gamaliel Painter, the original owner of this cane, was one of the visionaries who helped found Middlebury College more than 200 years ago. When he died in 1819, he left his estate to the College, including this walking stick, which he was often seen carrying around town and across campus. At the time, campus was entirely located on the site that is now Twilight Hall, at the bottom of the hill on the way into town.

Since his death, Gamaliel Painter's cane has become the College's mace—carried by the president at all academic ceremonial occasions, to signify Middlebury's founding spirit, its optimism, and its future. It's a well-traveled, well-handled cane. Incoming undergraduates pass the cane from student to student during first-year Convocation, and it has now made the trip with me to Monterey for the Middlebury Institute of International Studies' commencement.

Today, each of you will receive your own cane, handcrafted here in Vermont of New England beech and ash, to carry forward into your life as a graduate of the Language Schools. These canes are a symbol of the historical ties that bind us all to this institution, the generosity that supports us, the hard work and learning that brought you to this place today, and the lifelong relationship between you and your new alma mater.

Your new alma mater. Alma mater, a Latin phrase—an allegorical one that means, literally, “nourishing mother.” I’ve now given you one more phrase in a new language, one that is probably not new to you, but one whose literal meaning you perhaps haven’t considered before.

But you have spent glorious months here considering the meaning of many, many other words, and phrases, and ideas—thinking, dreaming, stumbling, joking, arguing, persuading, dancing, running, sighing, playing, and hoping, in another language.

You have succeeded in achieving what you might have dreamed was impossible all those months and years ago when you first began this adventure with your new nourishing mother and your new Language Schools family.

And within this family, because of this you have changed. Every single one of you graduates I have spoken with has told me that you indeed have a different identity in your second language. And most of you have gone on to describe what that is: I dance more in Spanish. I’m tougher in Russian. I am more easygoing in French. I like my family more in Chinese. I have more friends in Hebrew. I’m kinder in German. I have a subtler sense of humor in Japanese. And you have not wanted to relinquish those personalities after the pledge has been lifted. I still see groups of you wandering around campus, speaking your language joyfully.

What is at the heart of this change? I believe it’s the Language Pledge, and its power.

At the beginning of the summer, and at the beginning of the many summers in which you have worked to earn your degree, you were told: May the pledge be with you. And it was.

You already know that the phrase “May the pledge be with you” is, of course, a play on the phrase from *Star Wars*—“May the force be with you.” Don’t worry—we checked with the copyright moguls before we went ahead and used it, and it falls under fair use. However, what you may not know is

that the force—that power that animates all things—is a concept from early Indian Sanskrit texts—the Upanishads.

The creators of *Star Wars* drew from this tradition when they wrote their screenplays.

So inadvertently, as of course you know I would think everyone always does, we return back to Sanskrit to enlighten us. You may have thought this exhortation was in English, but really—it's Sanskrit!

More seriously, the Upanishads describe students sitting under trees with their teachers and learning things through immersion, just as you have done here at Middlebury.

Even more momentously, for early Indian thinkers, the first idea of the force—called Brahman—was not magical, or about waving a wand. It was the simple idea that the power of the word held up the world.

And the power of the well-spoken word guaranteed human flourishing and prosperity.

You have done that too. Three thousand years later, through the power of your well-spoken word, you have contributed to human flourishing and prosperity.

I offer you a bit more Latin here: You have become masters—literally, from the Latin, ones who are called to teach. You have become doctors—literally, from the Latin, ones who lead others, who show the way.

So long may you go on thinking, dreaming, stumbling, joking, arguing, persuading, dancing, running, sighing, playing, and hoping, in another language.

Finally, today: I hope, in the work of achieving your degree, you have also been replenished. I hope that the letters now written after the letters that make up your name might not only signal pedigree, but also possibility. Not only pedigree, but also possibility.

I hope that your dispositions and habits of mind have been newly sharpened, invigorated, ready to engage again in the work of placing language at the center of all our human relationships.

The pledge has clearly been with you. Congratulations and my very deepest best wishes for you in all the worlds you will now inhabit.

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Office Hours - Spring 2023
Friday, March 31 from 1:00-2:30 p.m.
Wednesday, April 26 from 2:00-3:30 p.m.
Monday, May 15 from 4:00-5:30 p.m.